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INFO RUEHDX/MOSCOW POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEHZU/ASIAN PACIFIC ECONOMIC COOPERATION
RUEHVK/AMCONSUL VLADIVOSTOK 1162

UNCLAS VLADIVOSTOK 000002

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SUBJECT: REGIONAL MEDIA TAKES A HIT IN PRIMORIYE

REF: 2008 VLADIVOSTOK 139

¶1. Summary: (U) On January 1, Vladivostok's citizens learned that OTV Prim, the region's largest television company with two million viewers, stopped broadcasting. OTV Prim is known locally as "the Governor's TV." Several days later, Sergey Bulakh, an Editor-in-Chief of the only daily newspaper "Vladivostok", was fired by newspaper owners. Both cases seriously reduce audience access to regional information and opinions.

Governor Darkin's TV ceased broadcasting in Vladivostok

¶2. (SBU) OTV Prim stated that the company went off the air because the Russian Broadcasting Corporation (RBC) refused to renew the contract. However, media expert Andrey Kalachinskiy questioned this explanation, noting that RBC also belongs to businesses connected with Governor Darkin. Valeriy Bakshin, General Director of Primorskiy Television and Radio Company (PRT), the local affiliate of Federal Rossia channel, stated that OTV Prim is funded from the Primorskiy Krai budget and the Kremlin will not tolerate such spending during the financial crisis. Other observers see OTV Prim's demise as a new attack on Governor Darkin, stating that in addition to its propaganda function, OTV Prim served as a mechanism for money laundering. They point out that in the mid-2008 OTV Prim General Director Anna Apalkova fled to Thailand after federal agencies began auditing the company.

Sudden dismissal of Editor-in-Chief in Vladivostok principal paper

¶3. (SBU) The media shakeup extended to print outlets too. Sergey Bulakh, Editor-in-Chief in Vladivostok Daily, the number 1 city daily, was dismissed on January 12, 2009, by the newspaper's new owner, Vostok-Cement Company. This company is owned by relatives of the newly-elected Vladivostok Mayor Igor Pushkarev. PTR reported Bulakh's dismissal occurred because he is a Head of Primorskiy Krai Journalist Association that criticized OMON for beating journalists during the December 21 protest (Reftel). However, several of Bulakh's colleagues point out he was beholden to Mayor Pushkarev. Vladivostok Daily was the only newspaper in the city that did not publish any reports about the recent protests. We were advised that Mayor Pushkarev met with the newspaper staff on January 13 and accused Bulakh of poor management and corruption, declaring that the Mayor's only goal is to make the newspaper a prosperous enterprise. However, some staff members worry that after this scandalous dismissal, the newspaper will eventually be labeled as a "Mayor's paper" by its readers resulting in bankruptcy of the publication. This occurred with several other the "Mayor's papers" that previously existed in the city. They feel the real goal of Pushkarev is the five-story newspaper office building.

14. Comment. (U) Both events seriously decrease the level of press freedom in Primorskiy Krai. OTV Prime and Vladivostok Daily are not independent media, however, they are high-profile regional enterprises that hire professional staff that occasionally challenged federal authorities. Vladivostok residents clearly recall that OTV and Vladivostok Daily coverage of the North Korean nuclear tests and border issues with China often differed from the reports by Moscow media. The scandals reduce the quality of both media and the citizens' access to local news and points of view.

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